

The Tartan Scarf
High School Entry

The Tartan Scarf

Inspired by a true story

A cold drop hit Richard's chest and slid down under his shirt. He started up and grabbed his collar, trying to dry away the uncomfortable wetness. It was not biting cold, for which he was thankful, but it was wet. His helmet required him to sit perfectly upright, or the light rain striking it would dribble off into his clothes instead of down between his feet. Glancing around the group of wet, uncomfortable men, Richard adjusted his rifle, his damp clothes clinging to his body like clammy frog-skin. If there had been room, he would have stretched his aching shoulders, but he had to content himself with simply rolling them around and rotating his neck a few times. He shook the water from his helmet and took a moment to stare up beyond the pattering rain to the dark sky.

Though night was waning, the sky was still sinister. Clouds enwrapped its surface, and they rolled and fluttered angrily, like fields of heather under a harsh moorland wind. The sea resembled this movement, and many of the men were seasick. At home, Richard had been used to the sea, helping his father with the fishing. So here, it was not the sea which troubled him. The wind was strong in Richard's ear, a biting ocean wind.

Taller than most, Richard enjoyed the advantage of looking over the other men's heads toward the bow of his landing craft, toward the distant beaches that he could not clearly see, due to the fog. It occurred to him then, with a pang of fear, that this height advantage might single him out as an easy target once they landed. He gritted his teeth

and took to examining the stitching on the shirt of the man in front of him. The men were quiet. It worsened Richard's anxiety, and he knew his nerves were on end. He could feel each crinkle in the uniform on his back, each defect on the surface of the gun under his fingers, each frayed end of the Tartan scarf against his chest.

It was not an entire scarf; only half of it rested in the inner pocket of his shirt. The other half, he knew, was lying in his twin brother's pocket. The morning he and Duncan had left to join the infantry, some months before, his father had cut the beautiful, old, red scarf in half and given one half to each of them.

"When you come back, safe and unharmed," he had said, "then, you bring back the old scarf, and your mum will sew it together again. May God keep you, and may He see that we unite this little clan again."

Richard moved his hand to his chest, tracing the edge of the scarf and feeling its woolly itchiness against his skin. Before he had boarded, he had chanced to see Duncan board the transport just before his own. They were in different companies, and he was not sure that they would be landing on the same beach.

Together he and Duncan had defended themselves as the youngest of the family. Together they had studied, slept, ate, worked, and fought. Together they had listened to their father's stories of the Great War. Together they had played at war along the rocky beaches near the fishing wharf. Together, now, would they die at war along this foreign beach? Or worse, what if only one half of the Tartan scarf made it home?

Richard felt a huge, clutching stone form in his stomach. Pursing his lips, he refused to open his mouth and give voice to the anxiety he wanted to release.

He remembered waving farewell to Duncan as his brother's back merged with the sea of other beige uniforms. That was only a few days ago, but what if it was the last he had seen of Duncan?

"Remember," their father had said, just before they were separated, "remember that the bone that is broken heals stronger than it was before."

What if it never heals? Richard thought now, echoing the fear his mother had voiced then. The wind gusted past him, and a shiver spread through his body.

"It will heal," his father had responded then, gazing directly into his mother's uncertain eyes. Richard remembered the tears that had glistened in his father's own eyes as he continued. "Even if it is broken longer than any of us would wish, one day all things broken will be made new. Be strong, my sons."

Richard closed his eyes and remembered his father's rich voice and deep sincerity. He tried to drive out the fear. He was fighting for that man, for his father, and for his mother, and for the clan whose scarf lay against his chest.

He opened his eyes and realized that the rising sun had just broken through the clouds. It was bright and distant, touching everything with a white light. Richard still felt cold inside, and the stone in his stomach was bigger. Hearing the drone of aircraft, he glanced up at the billowing sky and saw a squadron of bombers rumbling across it, charging toward the shore.

The troops rustled and murmured. The barge lurched to the side, and each man steadied himself by grabbing another's shoulders. Richard leaned forward, straining his eyes, trying to pierce the mist. The rumble of bombs and the spatter of anti-aircraft fire

grew louder and more menacing as they drew closer, and underneath it all was the churning and crashing of the sea about the boats and against the shore.

It was coming. Richard grated his jaw back and forth against his teeth, his eyes skimming from face to face and then out to sea, and he could distinguish the myriad of black shapes that were the other landing craft. Richard heard them plowing through the water, but he still felt very alone in the mass of men.

The sea rose up and slapped the boat, shoving it along viciously. Richard felt the cold spray and fingered the scarf in his pocket. He glanced again at the hundreds of boats around them.

Duncan must be in one of them, he told himself. If he could only see his brother now, and together they could charge the enemy.

It must be done, he reminded himself. *Nothing else is an option. This must be done. Alone or together, it must be done. Courage, courage!*

The tanks had landed, and the gunfire became a roar, a loud sound, without cadence or order or life. They were closing in. Richard could hear the sputtering of guns, the shouts of men, the splattering of bullets on water. Each man hunkered down and prepared to jump out. As Richard crouched over, his gun clanked against his helmet with a dull thud.

The command ripped through the air, and suddenly, with great splashing, Richard leapt into the water. It was very cold, and he sank up to his thighs, but before he could think any further, he was charging the shore. The troubled water was riddled with bullets, and Richard felt the splash they created when they hit the water. Screams

accosted his ears, and he saw his companions fall into the waves, the foaming blue sea suddenly accented with crimson.

It must be done! He heard it shouting in his head. Through the sloshing waters, he charged forward, feeling the whiz of bullets as they passed his ear. His comrades ran beside him. Richard emerged from the water, coming up onto the shore, and he felt completely exposed. Stooping low, he ran up the sandy embankment, trying not to think or fear, but the adrenaline coursing through his veins made all of his senses even more acute. The sand encrusted his wet body, filling his mouth with grit and salt as he scrambled over the beach, trying to avoid the barbed wire and debris piled up everywhere. With his companions, he topped the first rise of beach and could see the torn landscape beyond—the trampled grasses and sand dunes that were oddly carved by gunfire and tank tracks.

A blood-curdling scream ripped through his consciousness, and the man beside him fell writhing to the ground. Richard looked, terrified, toward the grasses and the cliffs above them, and vaguely he saw the cruel black mouths of machine guns sweeping across the shore. He flattened himself against the sands, hiding behind the dead body of his comrade. Fire from the battleships screamed overhead, and Richard heard bombs deploying somewhere in the distance. The men behind him had gotten up and were running forward.

He jumped up, firing into the grasses which hid so much death. The machine guns roared in spiteful fits. Confusion dominated the beach. Richard suddenly felt a tremendous blow to his head, and he was flung backward, landing hard on the solid sand.

Stunned, he lay for a moment, trying to regain his breath and make the ringing in his head subside. As the reality of the battle flew back into his consciousness, he rocked on the ground, cupping his ears with his hands, fighting to shut out the roar and death and fury of the battle. His finger crept up to the nick in his helmet where the bullet must have hit and ricocheted away. Hugging his gun to his chest, he looked around the body behind which he found himself lying. The mouths of the machine guns were still looking down at him.

It must be done! He heard it again. He readied himself to leap out, but his body would not respond, and it remained frozen on the sand. Every muscle ached with adrenaline, but he could not move, and Richard dug his forehead into the rough, dirty, broken sand.

It can't be done. He shook in agony, trembling and sweating. He knew he was moaning, but he had no control to stop it. All was dead. What if this body behind which he hid was Duncan's?

The shock of the thought moved him to action, and frantically, he rolled the body over to see the bloodied face. It was not his brother's.

Suddenly, upon a burst of fresh fire, a nearby soldier threw himself to the ground next to Richard, huddling close to him behind the shelter of the body.

"Soon as that gun's quiet, let's make for the next bank," the soldier muttered fiercely. Richard whipped around to look into the intense face.

"Duncan!" he whispered in disbelief.

Duncan turned quickly.

“Richard!” For a stunned moment, the two were frozen in shock. A shell whizzed over their heads, and they cowered under the sound, wrapping their arms over their helmets. When it exploded in the water behind them, Duncan threw his arms around Richard’s shoulders, and they held each other in desperate relief.

“Stay with me!” Duncan breathed fiercely. “Stay with me, Richard.” He paused and then whispered ferociously, “Let’s take the next bank, together!”

Richard raised his eyes above the body, staring at the confused and wild beach. He saw the dead bodies; the shreds of cloth strewn on wire; the abandoned guns lying ownerless; the sightless eyes and writhing injured. He heard the wailing of bereft mothers, the moans of crippled soldiers, and the cries of families never to be united. He felt the stone inside; he felt the freezing of his muscles.

It must be done! He saw through a haze that his hands were white, as one clutched his gun, the other his brother’s shoulder.

It can’t be done. The thought dropped down into the pit of his stomach with a dull thud. Richard lowered his head, succumbing to the despair.

Perfect love casteth out fear. He opened his eyes. That was his father’s voice.

“Let’s do it, Richard!” Duncan said again, preparing to jump out.

*Perfect love...*Richard hesitated. For his father. For his mother. For the clan whose scarf lay against his chest. For Duncan. Richard looked straight into Duncan’s eyes. He paused. Then he took a deep breath and shouted.

“Together!” he yelled fiercely. Richard tightened his grip on his brother’s shoulder, and they nodded at each other. Then, with a tremendous shout, they grasped their guns and charged the bank.

Epilogue

While the events of this story are fictional, they were inspired by a true story. Richard (“Dick”) and Duncan were real twin brothers. Of Scottish heritage, the two joined the British army shortly before the outbreak of World War II. At first, they held non-combatant, administrative positions, but upon necessity, were put into an artillery unit and stationed in France in early 1940. During the frantic evacuation of the British from Belgium, as the Germans were quickly advancing across the little country in May of 1940, the twins were separated. Their miraculous reunion occurred not at D-day, but during the British retreat to Dunkirk. They boarded the last battleship at Dunkirk before the jetty collapsed, but they both made it safely home to England. Richard did not return to combat, but Duncan went on to participate in the two years of training which lead up to D-day. On June 6, 1944, his artillery unit was one of the first units ashore at 7:30 A.M. He ended the war in Germany as the Allies took over the country. After Richard and Duncan left the army in 1946, Richard came to America and worked for Chrysler, later living in Switzerland, working for Chrysler’s European branch. He passed away in 1986 at the age of 72. Duncan went on to work in accounting, working mainly from the UK, but also spending a few years working in Cyprus during the Turkish Cypriot/Greek Cypriot tension. He died in 2005 at the age of 90. The twins were my great-great uncles.